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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S. PRESIDENT'S TOUR TO THE REGION.

1. SUMMARY: President Bush's tour to the region is garnering extensive local media coverage in Oman. The media described his tour as "controversial" because of his remarks in support of Israel, in local eyes contradicting the purpose of the visit. Both private and government dailies expressed the reactions of the observers and officials that varied from pessimism and official welcoming. Online commentary focuses on the omission of Oman from the President's itinerary and rumors regarding a possible unannounced stop. END SUMMARY.

COVERAGE

2. News of U.S. president George W. Bush's state visit to region received prominent, above-the-fold front-page coverage with large color photos in Omani dailies. On Thursday, January 10 the state-owned Arabic daily "Oman" (circulation 38,000) carried photos showing warm greetings among the President, Secretary Rice, and Israeli officials - contrasted with the image of a Palestinian girl crying for the loss of a relative killed in an Israeli raid. On Friday, January 11 the privately owned Arabic daily "Al-Watan" (circulation 42,000) led with Bush's statement that "The barricades cause suffering to Palestinians but are security to the Israelis" as its main headline. It stated that President called for ending occupation and suggested an international mechanism to compensate the refugees and he awaits a peace deal before the end of his term. "Al-Watan" also front-paged a photo of from the President's arrival ceremony in Bahrain on Sunday January 13. Private Arabic, youth-oriented "Al-Shabibah" (circulation 20,000) reported that Bush and Ehud Olmert spent two hours discussing Iran, as well as the President's reaffirmation of full support to the security of the "Jewish state."

"... A GREAT PUSH TO THE EFFORTS OF PEACE..."

3. On January 12, state-owned daily "Oman" published a positive editorial about the President's intention to establish peace in the region, under the headline "Bush and another move to empower peace":

"Regardless of the President's reaffirmation of his commitment to the U.S. policy supporting Israel and its security at all circumstances, the President has also stressed not only the possibility of reaching a settlement before leaving the White House next January, but also very important points about the importance of

Israel's withdrawal out of the territories it occupied in 1967, and on the establishment of a Palestinian State, in addition to stressing the need that both sides should negotiate and agree on any amendments to the borders, and his pointing out to a mechanism to compensate Palestinian refugees. As such, the U.S. President has given a great push to the efforts of peace and the Arab-Israeli negotiations. . . . However, as Abbas noted, the whole matter hangs on Israel's readiness to avail the opportunity to reach peace."

BUT "NO LEGAL BASIS" FOR THE PUSH

¶4. Privately owned "Al-Watan" published on the same date an editorial, "Statements that needed more explanations":

"The US President's suggestions regarding the final solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict are not binding to any one. In the presence of international resolutions and clear guidelines for the final solution, the President's suggestions on the return to 1967 borders and refugees' compensation have no legal bases. That is why the Palestinian Authority (Sayib 'Iraiqat) wasted no time to distance itself away from Bush statements. It is duty of All Arabs, not only Sayib 'Iraiqat, to reiterate rejecting President Bush attempts to drive the main issues in the settlement out of the UN umbrella. If he meant to please Olmert, the Israelis, or the Jewish lobby, this does necessarily demolish all the main pillars of the settlement."

U.S. SUPPORT a "GREEN LIGHT" AGAINST GAZA?

¶5. The lead editorial in "Al-Watan" on January 13 continued attacking the President's remarks in support of Israel as "A Dualism

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refused by Arab Conscious:"

"The statements of the American president during his tour were more to satisfy Israelis than an intention to express the American position toward reaching a compromise between the two states - the ostensible purpose of this tour. In every statement and remark in this tour by the president we discover a new dimension characterizing the U.S. position that fully, absolutely, and thoughtlessly supports Israel. According to Israeli military sources, one of the fruits harvested by Israel as a result of this tour was getting the U.S. green light to launch a wide scale attack against Gaza strip on the pretext of restoring its control under the Palestinian Authority. By itself, this is a notion that contradicts with the call for resolving the conflict peacefully."

ONLINE: WHERE'S OUR VISIT?

¶6. Omani online commenters, on both the Arabic and English Sablas (www.omania2.net and www.englishsabla.com, respectively), as well as on several leading blogs, focused less on the regional impact of the President's visit and more on the omission of Oman from his itinerary. Some commenters attributed the oversight to the Sultanate's already close relationship with the U.S., while one writer pointed out that, given the frequency of his visits, Oman must fall in the portfolio of Vice President Cheney. Several posited hopefully that a "secret" visit must be in the offing.

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